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ABSTRACT

No published research has investigated the impact of joint custody on the adjustment of children of divorce who become stepchildren. This research examined the differential effects of joint versus maternal custody, structural complexity (presence or absence of stepfather's children from a prior marriage), and sex and age of adolescent on adolescent outcomes in stepfamilies. The volunteer sample consisted of wives, husbands, and oldest or only adolescents in 84 white, middle-class stepfather families. Each family member independently completed a questionnaire in the family's home. Findings revealed that adolescents in joint custody and simple stepfamilies reported more happiness and more inclusion than did those in joint custody and complex stepfamilies. Joint custody families with older adolescents and with boys reported the most role ambiguity (disagreement about the stepfather's role in the family). Structural complexity affected loyalty conflicts only for younger adolescents, who reported less loyalty conflicts in complex stepfamilies. Boys were reported to have greater well-being than girls regardless of custody arrangement. (Implications for theory and policy are discussed.) (Author)

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Impact of Joint versus Maternal Legal Custody, Sex and Age of Adolescent, and Family Structure Complexity on Adolescents in Remarried Families

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Impact of Joint versus Maternal Custody, Sex and Age of Adolescent, and Family Structure Complexity on Adolescents in Remarried Families

Abstract

No published research has investigated the impact of joint custody on the adjustment of children of divorce who become stepchildren. This research examined the differential effects of joint versus maternal custody, structural complexity (presence of absence of stepfather's children from a prior marriage), and sex and age of adolescent on adolescent outcomes in stepfamilies. The volunteer sample consisted of wives, husbands, and oldest or only adolescents in 84 white, middle-class stepfather families. Each family member independently completed a questionnaire in the family's home. Findings revealed that adolescents in joint custody and simple stepfamilies reported more happiness and more inclusion than those in joint custody and complex stepfamilies. Joint custody families with older adolescents and with boys reported the most role ambiguity (disagreement about the stepfather's role in the family). Structural complexity affected loyalty conflicts only for younger adolescents, who reported less loyalty conflicts in complex stepfamilies. Boys were reported to have greater well-being

than girls regardless of custody arrangement. Implications for theory and policy are discussed.

As increasing numbers of states are adopting some form of joint custody legislation in an effort to support continued relationships between children of parental divorce and both of their biological or adoptive parents,[22] the controversy over the costs and benefits of joint versus sole custody for children heightens. Nearly all of the published research in this area has focused on comparing children who lived in joint versus sole maternal custody arrangements and whose parents were not remarried. Based on a variety of psycho-social, medical, and subjective measures, the studies reported either no differences in these two groups of children or better adjustment for the joint custody children.[8,13,15,19,20,21,23]

Unfortunately, in addition to methodological problems like self-selected samples and short term results, this research suffers from a major flaw--cause and effect conclusions cannot be made from the positive relationships between joint custody and child outcomes that some studies report. We cannot conclude that joint custody is the cause of positive child outcomes, because "better" parents may be the cause of both joint custody and better-adjusted children. In other words, it may be the quality of parenting that produces positive child outcomes (not a novel idea!), and joint custody may be another outcome of good parenting. In

order to conclusively test the effect of custody arrangement on child outcomes, we would have to assign parents to joint versus sole custody on a random basis. Obviously, this is not possible. However, the movement toward the presumption of joint custody opens up new research possibilities for studying the effects of custody arrangement in the future.

At present both the legislative move toward joint custody and the research in the area are short-sighted. Few policy makers and scholars seem to be considering the fact that three-fourths of all previously married women and five-sixths of all previously married men remarry; half do so within the first three years of divorce or widowhood.[3] Sixty percent of these remarrying partners have custody of one or more minor children and another 20% are non-custodial parents.[9] This means that most children and parents of divorce spend a relatively short period of time in the single-parent household before moving into another transition--adjustment to remarriage and the formation of a stepfamily.[7] Even so, the effect of remarriage on custody arrangement has not been studied sufficiently and the effect of custody arrangement on remarried family life has been addressed by only one group of scholars.[10] In their report of clinical observations, Grief and Simring claim that children in joint custody arrangements fare better in their adjustment

to parental remarriage, because they experience less threat of emotional loss of a sole custodial parent as that parent moves into a conjugal relationship, and less loyalty conflicts between the biological parent and the stepparent of the same sex. Similarly, the non-remarrying biological parent is less threatened by the new stepparent; since his/her relationship with the child is legally secured, this parent need not pressure the child for reassurance.

A related area of research has begun in the stepfamily literature. Researchers have become interested in ties to family members outside of the stepfamily household "from the other side of the stepfamily", that is, stepparents' ties to children from former marriage and the impact on stepchildren's adjustment. From a family systems perspective, these two types of attachments of stepfamily members to family members in other households are similar--joint custody preserves the position of the residential biological parent's prior spouse within the structural, psychological, and economic boundary of the stepfamily system, just as non-residential biological children of the stepparent can be considered within the boundary of the stepfamily system. It has been hypothesized[2] that complex stepfamilies (those in which the stepfather has children from prior marriage) will experience more stress, due to the

complicated structure, roles, and relationships, than simple stepfamilies (those in which the stepfather has no prior children). Research to date has found that adults in complex stepfamilies reported more problems with child rearing and parenting issues than adults in simple stepfamilies,[11] but to date differences in child outcomes between simple and complex stepfamilies have not been found.[5]

The present exploratory study integrated these two areas of research. The impact of both custody arrangement and structural complexity on stepchildren's well-being and other measures of stepfamily dynamics were examined. In addition, because joint custody is associated with more contact between the non-residential parent and the stepfamily, frequency of contact alone could account for any results of differential custody arrangement. Therefore, the effect of frequency of child visitation with the non-residential parent on the dependent measures was tested in the maternal custody subsample also.

Method

Subjects

The volunteer sample consisted of 84 caucasion mother-stepfather families with adolescent children; they lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and were identified through personal referrals, stepfamily support groups, and

clinicians. The households were middle- and upper-middle-class and 84% of the wives worked outside the home. The median family income was $60,000. The median length of the present marriages was 3.25 years. Twenty-one percent of the stepfamilies shared joint legal custody with a non-residential father; 79% had maternal custody. One third of the families had additional children born into the remarried family. The oldest or only adolescent living in the household at least half time was the target adolescent. (In reality nearly all of the adolescents resided with their mothers and had a "visiting" status in their fathers' homes.) The adolescents were seventh through twelth graders; the median age was 15 and 50% were boys. The median age of the wives was 39; all had been divorced prior to remarriage. Nearly half of the wives had some graduate or professional school training; one fourth were college graduates and one fourth had at least some vocational schooling or college. The median age of the husbands was 38; 66% had been previously married; 47% had biological children from a prior marriage. Nearly two thirds of the husbands had some graduate or professional school training; one fifth were college graduates and the remaining 15% had some vocational school or college.

Instrument

Three forms of an assessment instrument were developed by the experimenter for the purpose of studying remarried families. The wife, husband, and youth forms consist of 160 psychologically oriented questions which had been generated to operationalize 20 constructs that relate to stepfamily adjustment. The questions were grouped conceptually and each group of questions was designed to be a subscale measuring one construct. With few exceptions, the response options are on a four-point Likert scale. The mean of the items in each subscale form the individual family member's score for that subscale. The adults' forms also contain questions about demographics and other background information like visitation, custody, finances, adolescent's well-being, etc.

Four of these subscales and an adolescent well-being checklist served as the dependent measures in the present analysis: The adolescents' reports of loyalty conflicts, psychological inclusion of the stepfather as part of the family, and happiness with the new family; a family level score designed to measure ambiguity of the stepfather's role (computed by a combination of the discrepancy between family members' responses on two items and individual responses on two items); the mothers' reports on their adolescents' well-being, measured by a checklist of psychosomatic and psycho-

social problems of children and adolescents. The mothers indicated not only the presence of problems, but increases and decreases in them as well.

Table 1 shows reliability coefficients that were obtained for the four subscales. Following are examples of individual questions from these four subscales as they appear on the adolescent's form. (Wording of the role ambiguity items on the husband's and wife's form is analogous.)

Loyalty Conflicts

1. "When I'm getting along with my stepfather, I feel like I'm not being loyal to my natural father" (The response pattern ranges from "True" to "Not True".)
2. "My mother wants me to forget about my natural father and let my stepfather be my only father" (The response pattern ranges from "True" to "Not True".)
3. "If I told my stepfather that I like my natural father, my stepfather would..." (The response pattern ranges from "like it" to "not like it".)

Psychological Inclusion of Stepfather

1. "When I think about including my stepfather into our family, I..." (The response pattern ranges from "am glad he's with us" to "wish he were not with us".)

2."I think of my stepfather as NOT really part of my family" (The response pattern ranges from "True" to "Not True".)

3."Please print the names of the people in your family." (The responses are coded for inclusion/non-inclusion of the stepfather.)

Happiness with New Family

1."I am happy that we made this new family." (The response pattern ranges from "True" to "Not True".)

2."I feel upset, worried, or anxious about my family..." (The response pattern ranges from "twice a day or more" to "once a month or less".)

3."How proud of my stepfamily am I?" (The response pattern ranges from "not proud at all" to "very proud".)

Role Ambiguity for Stepfather Role

1."Ideally, to what extent SHOULD my stepfather be DISCIPLINING me?" (The response pattern ranges from "It is not really his job." to "Fully, the same as a natural father.") (discrepancy scores used)

2."Ideally, to what extent SHOULD my stepfather be giving me love and affection?" (same response pattern as above) (discrepancy scores used, but

adult forms read "nurturing" instead of "giving love and affection")

3. "When I think about the kinds of things a stepfather should do, I..." (The response pattern is "really do NOT know what he SHOULD be doing in this family", "am not sure", think I know", "know exactly what he SHOULD be doing in this family".)

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

In the initial telephone contact, one of the spouses was told that the study addressed the adjustment of stepfamilies, and that the family members would be asked to complete questionnaires. The adult was asked to query his/her spouse and the adolescent about participation. If the spouses and the adolescent agreed to participate, a date and time were set. The instruments were administered in each family's home at the convenience of the family by the experimenter or a rained assistant. The family members completed their instruments independently.

Analysis

A 2x2x2x2 analysis of variance was computed for each of the dependent measures. The independent variables were

custody arrangement, complex versus simple family structure, sex of the adolescent, and age group of the adolescent (12-15 vs. 16-18). Only main effects and first order interactions were considered, because the number of subjects per cell in second and higher order interactions was small.

In order to test whether any findings for custody arrangement were simply a result of continued involvement of the non-residential father with his child, a second set of 2x2x2x2 analyses of variance were computed for each of the dependent measures, using only the subsample of families with maternal custody (n=66). Frequency of visitation (bi-weekly or more vs. less than bi-weekly) was substituted for custody arrangement in the independent variables.

Results

Well-Being

Neither custody arrangement, structural complexity, nor age of adolescent had a main effect on any of the dependent variables. However, the sex of the adolescent differentiated between good and poor well-being ($F(1,73) = 4.5$, $p=.04$); boys were reported to have better well-being than girls. In addition, the analysis revealed interaction effects among the independent variables for all of the other dependent measures. (See Table 2.)

Insert Table 2 about here

Loyalty Conflicts

A significant interaction between structural complexity and age of adolescents revealed that younger adolescents in complex stepfamilies reported less loyalty conflict than younger adolescents in simple stepfamilies or older adolescents in complex stepfamilies. There were no significant results in the analogous analysis of loyalty conflicts using the maternal custody subsample.

Psychological Inclusion of the Stepfather

A significant interaction between custody arrangement and structural complexity showed that adolescents who lived in simple stepfamilies with joint custody arrangements considered their stepfathers to be a part of their family more often than adolescents who lived in complex stepfamilies with joint custody. Adolescents in maternal custody arrangements reported scores between these two groups of joint custody adolescents ($F(1,73) = 4.1$, $p<.05$). There were no significant findings in the analogous analysis with the maternal custody subsample.

Happiness with the New Stepfamily

These results show the same pattern as the inclusion results above. Again, a significant interaction between custody arrangement and structural complexity showed that adolescents who lived in simple stepfamilies with joint custody arrangements reported being happier than adolescents who lived in complex stepfamilies with joint custody, and adolescents in maternal custody arrangements reported scores between these two groups of joint custody adolescents ($F(1,73) = 5.7$, $p<.02$). Similarly, there were no significant findings in the analogous analysis with the maternal custody subsample.

Stepfather Role Ambiguity

Two significant interactions between custody arrangement and age of adolescent ($F(1,73) = 3.8$, $p=.05$), and custody arrangement and sex of adolescent ($F(1,73) = 3.9$, $p=.05$) found stepfamily members in joint custody arrangements with older adolescents and with boys to have the most disagreement and uncertainty about the stepfather's role in the family. Stepfamily members in sole custody arrangements with older adolescents and boys, and in joint custody arrangements with girls agreed the most on the stepfather's role. There were no significant findings in the analogous analysis with the maternal custody subsample.

Discussion

These data suggest that adolescent well-being in stepfamilies is less a function of the structure of the family than it is the sex of the adolescent. The finding that girls in stepfamilies are showing more negative outcomes than boys is consistent with other studies examining sex differences among stepchildren in family-related stress[14] and relations with stepparents.[4,6,11,16,17,18]

Other aspects of adjustment and family dynamics do appear to be related to custody arrangement and structural complexity in subtle ways. These two factors interacted in their effect on the adolescents' happiness with the new family and psychological inclusion of the stepfather into the family group, the latter of which has been found to be negatively associated with dysfunction in stepfather families.[1] Less happiness and less inclusion were reported in the most complicated of situations--joint custody and complex structure. However, the most happiness and the most inclusion were reported in joint custody and simple structure situations--adolescents had a secure attachment with their biological father and a stepfather who had no children in other households to which to give emotional or financial resources. This finding further refines Grief and Simring's[10] clinical observations that children of joint custody in

general adjusted to parental remarriage better than children of sole custody.

Joint custody does appear to create more confusion about the stepfather's role in the stepfamily, but only in combination with older adolescents and male adolescents. Consensus and certainty about who should be fathering the adolescents is lower in joint custody families with older adolescents or male adolescents, thus leaving an unclear role for these stepfathers. Because no analogous significant results or trends were found in the sole custody subsample, it can be concluded that the custody findings were a function of legal custody and not a function of frequency of contact with the non-residential parent.

Lastly, structural complexity, but not custody arrangement, affected loyalty conflicts only for younger adolescents, who reported feeling caught in the middle less often when stepfathers had other children that they were fathering. Perhaps these stepfathers were not soliciting recognition as fathers from their stepchildren, because this need was met by their biological children. The lack of impact of differential custody arrangement on loyalty conflicts is consistent with prior research with children of divorce.[19]

Implications

Theory and Research. This study has shown that family systems theory provides a useful framework in which to examine the effects of custody arrangement and structural complexity on stepfamily life. Theoretically, the inclusion of relationships with other households in the larger family system appears to be a necessity in explaining phenomena in the stepfamily household.

With respect to research, the findings demonstrate the importance of including indicators of structural relationships between co-parenting households when conducting research with the remarried family. In addition, research aimed at discovering how older adolescents learn to handle potential loyalty conflicts and identifying the processes that facilitate stepfathers' becoming psychologically included into the family would be useful. Perhaps most importantly, the sex difference in adolescents' adjustment in stepfamilies deserves further study.

Legal and Educational Policy. This study has legal and educational policy implications, as well. The effects of custody arrangements made at the time of divorce continue to affect children's lives even into the remarried households. Lawyers, judges, and mediators need to consider the potential long-range effects of the joint versus sole custody

arrangement. Specifically, these findings suggest that awarding or presuming joint custody may mean creating more problems for future stepfamilies, particularly stepfather families of adolescent boys and older adolescents, and especially if the stepfather has children from a prior marriage. The legal question may become, "Does the law support continued relations between members of the first family or does the law support the unity of the remarried family household?" Can we create a custody policy that can support both, or are the needs of these overlapping groups mutually exclusive?

These and prior findings suggest that the best solution may be a combination of joint custody and education and support for the remarried family in coping with the stresses associated with the interdependence of co-parental households and multiple parents. Specifically, the data suggest that men who marry women with joint custody need support in identifying a role in the remarried family that complements the biological father's role rather than competes with it. Mediators as well as counselors and therapists could be instrumental in helping stepfamilies negotiate roles and relationships, with the purpose of helping family members discover which roles are most appropriate for their

particular family, given factors like custody arrangement, child's age, etc.

Public education should respond to the growing numbers of adults who find themselves in joint custody situations with few successful models in the media and elsewhere. In addition, mothers with joint custody and mothers of adolescent girls need to be sensitized to the potential additional complications they may be incurring by remarrying, especially to a man who has had another family.

Limitations

These results must be considered tentative. Not only is the sample small, it is a volunteer sample of white, middle- and upper-middle class stepfather families. The results should not be generalized to ethnic minority groups, low socio-economic status populations, or stepmother families.

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Table 1: Reliability Coefficients for Each Subscale

	Reliability measure	
Subscale	Internal consistency (coefficient alpha)	Test-retest (2 week interim)
Loyalty conflicts	.74	.88
Psychological inclusion of stepfather	.85	.93
Happiness with new family	.90	.92
Role ambiguity for stepfather role	.67[a]	.82

Note. N=84 unless otherwise noted. All correlations are significant at $p < .05$ or better.

[a] This coefficient would be expected to be low by definition, because it is a composite of family members' responses and it reflects the discrepancies in perceptions of stepfather role across family members.

Table 2: Means of Dependent Measure Scores for Significant Results from Analyses of Variance Using Custody Arrangement, Complexity of Family Structurea, Sex of Adolescent, and Age of Adolescent as Independent Variables

Dependent Measures	Joint custody	Maternal custody
Inclusion of stepfather		
Simple structure	1.4	1.7
Complex structure	2.0	1.6
Happiness with family		
Simple structure	1.2	2.0
Complex structure	2.2	1.9
Stepfather role ambiguity		
Older adolescents	2.1	1.8
Younger adolescents	1.9	1.9
Stepfather role ambiguity		
Girls	1.8	1.9
Boys	2.1	1.8

Table 2. (continued)

	Younger adols.	Older adols.
Loyalty conflicts		
Simple structure	2.0	1.7
Complex structure	1.5	1.9
	Girls	Boys
Well-being	4.7	2.4

Note. N=84 unless otherwise noted.

Note. Higher scores denote poorer adjustment--more conflict, less inclusion, less happiness, more role ambiguity, and lower well-being.

[a] Simple stucture denotes stepfamilies in which stepfather does not have children from prior marriage; complex denotes stepfamilies in which stepfather does have children from prior marriage.